



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

---

SKETCH OF THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF BOCCACCIO.

No. I.

THE plan of the Magazine embraces, among other objects, occasional accounts of celebrated works of Entertainment; in presenting which, it will be of importance to preserve among them some connexion, that the different works may illustrate one another, and may shew the progress and variety of the same kind of composition.

At the commencement of such a series, without entering into the obscurities of antiquarianism, the attention is naturally directed to the earliest writers, and to those who have had the greatest influence over others. Among these, the celebrated Italian, Boccaccio, well known by his *Decameron*, occupies a conspicuous place. He is regarded by his countrymen as the Father of Italian Prose; and he is known over Europe as the first who threw an air of classical elegance over modern stories. His stories, too, have been repeated in a thousand forms, and the peculiarities of his manner have been frequently imitated, both in prose and verse. He may, therefore, be placed with propriety at the head of any series of illustrations of modern fiction.

The particulars of his life, many of which are enveloped in obscurity, it is unnecessary here to detail. He is associated, in the recollections of most readers, with some of his distinguished contemporaries, Dante and Petrarch, in Italy; and Chaucer, Gower, and other celebrated characters, in England; who shed a lustre over the fourteenth century, and contributed to the early revival of learning in Europe. As one in that illustrious group, indeed, he is peculiarly entitled to the gratitude of posterity.

Giovanni Boccaccio was born in 1313, nine years after the birth of Petrarch, and eight before the death of Dante. His father was a native of Florence, and most probably a merchant of considerable property: but whether Boccaccio was born there or at Paris, which his father frequently visited on business, is uncertain. Florence was undoubtedly the place where he was brought up, and where he spent the greater part of his life. His early youth was chiefly distinguished by indications of a decided passion for literature, which burst through all the restraints that had been put upon it by his

destination to business. His father had intended him for a commercial life ; but before devoting him to it, had indulged him with a liberal education. To oblige his father, he made several journeys on business, which led him into France and other countries ; but he brought back with him, instead of a love of his employment, a more extended information, and an increased passion for study. His choice was finally determined in the twenty-eighth year of his age, when he had occasion to be in Naples, probably on business, and took an opportunity of visiting Virgil's tomb, in the neighbourhood of that city. There, imbibing the enthusiasm which the scene was peculiarly calculated to inspire, he relinquished commerce, and devoted himself entirely to the muses. His father acquiesced in his choice, on condition that he should apply himself to the Canon Law ; a branch of study at that time most popular in Italy, both among the laity and ecclesiastics, and the surest path to preferment. He prosecuted the study of it at Bologna, its principal seat, under the same teachers whom Petrarch had previously attended ; between whose history and his own, indeed, there were in this, and other instances, many striking coincidences. But, like Petrarch, and other celebrated characters in that age, Boccaccio, after prosecuting for several years this branch of study, relinquished it as one for which he had no relish, and betook himself entirely to the cultivation of general literature. His attention was particularly directed to classical learning, especially Greek, which had been recently introduced into Italy, and in which he became one of the most distinguished proficient. He seems to have prosecuted these favourite studies chiefly at Naples, under the patronage of Robert, one of the most distinguished princes of the age, whose munificent encouragement rendered that city, for some time, one of the most eminent seats of learning.

Robert was the third King of Naples, of the house of Anjou ; and is described by his contemporaries as enthusiastic in his attachment to literature, and amiable in private life, as well as liberal in his public administration. "He was indeed," says Petrarch, "the only Prince who loved letters, and encouraged men of learning. Neither the capriciousness of fortune, the ignorance of his time, nor the contempt in which science was held, could detach him from study. In the midst of the most important affairs, even in the tumults of war, day and night, he had always his books about him ; and thus became one of the most learned Princes of modern times." Such circumstances rendered his court the favourite resort of the *litterati* of Italy and the surrounding countries.

While Boccaccio resided in this court, he had an opportunity of becoming acquainted with Petrarch, with whom he afterwards formed the closest intimacy, founded on similarity of taste. Their first interview was connected with the most remarkable event in Petrarch's life,—his coronation in the Capitol of Rome, in 1341. This event is memorable, as the revival of an ancient practice, of crowning the most distinguished Poets with laurel,—which had been suspended for 1000 years. It was revived at this period, when letters began to be cultivated; and Petrarch was chosen, by general consent, to be the first who should succeed to the honour, which Virgil and Horace had enjoyed.

It should be recollected, to the honour of Petrarch, that previous to his coronation, he himself wished to undergo a public examination on various branches of literature: and named Robert King of Naples, with whose character he had been long acquainted, as the best qualified to conduct it. For this purpose he repaired to the Court of Naples, where he was received with the most flattering distinction; and underwent an examination for several days, in which Robert took a principal part. Other literary characters in the Neapolitan court acted also as examiners; among whom was Boccaccio. It is unnecessary to add, that Petrarch succeeded in his object. He obtained the warmest recommendations from Robert and the literati of his court: and proceeded to Rome, where he was crowned, amid great pomp, on Easter-day, 1341.\*

\* The following is the account given of his coronation in the *Life of Petrarch*, Vol. I. page 168:—

"The assembly was convoked early in the morning on Easter-day, which happened to be very serene, and favourable to the solemnity. The trumpets sounded; and the people, eager to view a ceremony which had been discontinued for so many years, ran in crowds to behold it. The streets were strewed with flowers, and the windows filled with ladies dressed in the most sumptuous manner, who sprinkled as much perfumed waters on the poet as would serve for a year in the kingdom of Spain.—Petrarch appeared at last at the capitol, preceded by twelve young men in scarlet habits. These were chosen out of the first families of Rome, and recited his verses; while he, adorned with the robe of state which the king of Naples had given him, followed, in the midst of six of the principal citizens clothed in green, with crowns of flowers on their heads; after whom came the chief Senator, accompanied by the first men of the council. When he was seated in his place, Petrarch made a short harangue upon a verse drawn from Virgil; after which, having cried three times, 'Long live the people of Rome! Long live the senator! God preserve them in liberty!' he kneeled down before the senator, who, after a short discourse, took from his head a crown of laurel, and put it upon Petrarch's, saying, 'This crown is the reward of merit.' Then Petrarch recited a fine sonnet on the heroes of Rome, which is not to be found in his works. The people showed their joy and approbation by long and repeated shouts; by clapping their hands, and crying out several times, 'Long flourish the capitol! Long live the poet!' Stephen Colonna then spoke; and, as he truly loved Petrarch, he gave him that praise which comes from the heart.—When the ceremony in the capitol was ended, Petrarch was conducted in pomp, with the same retinue, to the church of St. Peter; where, after a solemn mass, and returning thanks to God for the honour he had received, he took off his crown to place it among the offerings, and hung it up on the arch of the temple."

Boccaccio and Petrarch, thus introduced to one another, afterwards exchanged several visits; and continued, during life, to correspond by letters, and to prosecute with ardour the same favourite objects, by which they became benefactors to posterity,—the study of the classics, the collection of ancient MSS., the elucidation of subjects of antiquity, and the introduction of Greek literature into Italy.

Among many points of resemblance between their character and history, one deserves particularly to be mentioned.—The affection of Petrarch for Laura, a married lady in Avignon, is the most singular circumstance in his life, and had an extensive influence on his character. It does not appear, however, to have led to any thing commonly regarded as criminal. The lady's vanity was flattered by the attentions of the most beautiful, accomplished, and celebrated man of his time; and Petrarch's passion seems to have expended itself in professions of adoration, and in the composition of his immortal sonnets, in the romantic solitudes of Vacluse.

Boccaccio was in a situation that had several points of resemblance, though it was in many respects different. It is thus described by Sismondi: "Distinguished no less for the elegance of his person than for the brilliancy of his wit, he formed an attachment to a natural daughter of Robert King of Naples, named Maria, who, for several years, had been the wife of a Neapolitan gentleman: this lady he has, in his writings, celebrated under the name of Fiammetta. In the attachment of Boccaccio, however, we must not look for that purity or delicacy which distinguished Petrarch in his love for Laura. This princess had been brought up in the most corrupt court of Italy: she herself partook of its spirit; and it is to her depraved taste that the exceptionable parts of the *Decameron*, a work undertaken in compliance with her request, and for her amusement, are to be attributed. On his side, Boccaccio probably loved her as much from vanity as from real passion; for, although distinguished for her beauty, her grace, and her wit, as much as for her rank, she does not seem to have exercised any extraordinary influence on his life: and neither does his conduct, or writings, afford evidence of a sincere or profound attachment."\*

He remained in Naples till 1343, when the death of Robert deprived him of his patron; and the confusions that ensued in the government, rendered that city less favourable to the cultivation of letters. He repaired to Florence; where, after visiting several other cities, he at last fixed his abode, in 1350.

\* Sismondi's *Literature of the South of Europe*, Vol. II. p. 4.

The reputation which he had acquired by his learning and writings, soon procured him the highest honours in his own city. It was one of the peculiarities of that age, that learned men were not only patronised by Princes, who vied with each other in the favours they bestowed ; but, even while engaged in public teaching, were occasionally employed as ambassadors, chancellors, and other most distinguished functionaries. Boccaccio, accordingly, was for many years engaged in public employments among the Florentines, and was sent on several embassies to the principal cities of Italy. But it is not by these civic honours that he is distinguished among posterity ; nor did they interfere with his more useful literary pursuits, to which indeed they were rendered subservient. They gave him an opportunity of corresponding with many literary men, particularly Petrarch, with whom he engaged in a species of labour characteristic of that age, and which claims the gratitude of posterity. This was to search for copies of the ancient classics, which were at that time scattered over Europe, and buried in the archives of convents ; and which could only be collected at great expense, by learned and zealous individuals, who had to undertake journeys to very distant places. The difficulties which they had to encounter ought to be familiarly known, as they show how much we are indebted to their exertions. They are thus described by Sismondi.—Not only were the MSS. scattered at great distances, but were incorrect, and incomplete, without tables of contents, marginal notes, or any of the facilities which printing affords. It must have required a powerful intellect to discover, in a MS. of Cicero, for example, without title or commencement, the full meaning of the author, the period at which he wrote, and other circumstances connected with his subject: to correct the numerous errors of the copyists, to supply the chasms, which, frequently occurring at the beginning and the end, left neither title nor divisions, nor conclusions, nor any thing to serve as a clue for the perusal ; in short, to determine how one MS. discovered at Heidelberg, should perfect another discovered at Naples. It was, in fact, by long and painful journeys that the scholars of those days accomplished themselves for this task. The copying of a MS., with accuracy, was a work of great labour and expense ; and a scholar was frequently compelled to seek, at a great distance, the completion of a work commenced under his own roof.—Petrarch and Boccaccio, in their frequent travels, even when engaged in public business, obtained many copies of the classics, which have thus been preserved to posterity.

Boccaccio was also among the first who exerted themselves to introduce the study of Greek into Italy. He founded in Florence, a chair for the teaching of that language; and installed as Professor, Leontius Pilatus, one of the most learned Greeks of Constantinople, whom he invited over for the purpose. Nay, he received Leontius into his own house, though he was a man of a disagreeable temper; placed him at his table, inscribed himself among the first of his scholars, and procured at his own expense from Greece, the MSS. which were distributed in Florence, and served as the subjects of the lectures. To estimate the importance of such exertion we should recollect, that the principal mode of instruction in those days, consisted in the delivery of public lectures with commentaries: and a book, of which there existed perhaps only a single copy, thus sufficed for some thousand scholars.

Towards the end of his life, he engaged in another employment, which, though of less general interest, was of great importance to Italian literature. It is well known, that Dante, his contemporary, but senior, who was also a Florentine, though he died in exile, became, immediately after his death, an object of the highest veneration in Florence and over Italy. His writings, however, were felt, even at that early period, to be so obscure, from the extreme condensation of their style, and at the same time so valuable, that the Florentines endowed a chair for public lectures on his poems; to which Boccaccio was the first that was appointed. He held the office only two years; when he was cut off, before he had illustrated more than the first seventeen cantos of the *Inferno*. But his commentaries, which are still preserved, are regarded as the best that have yet been given of that most singular and interesting work.—He died at Certaldo, his rural residence near Florence, to which he often retired, in 1375, in the 71st year of his age.

With regard to his character, it may only be observed, that although his youth was tarnished by the vices of an age at once rude and voluptuous, which have also tainted some of his writings; in his more advanced years he was brought under the influence of moral and religious principle, which led to a change in his manner of life. This was chiefly owing to the advice and example of his friend Petrarch, who, amid many foibles, always retained a sense of religion and virtue. From this time he engaged in more serious pursuits, and regretted the levities and improprieties that are found in his earlier works.

With a zeal, not unusual among those who are suddenly brought under serious impressions, he resolved to abandon

the pursuits of literature entirely, and betake himself to some monkish retreat. He proposed to part with his library, and begged his friend Petrarch to accept of it, as a discharge of some debts which he owed him. From this, however, he was dissuaded by Petrarch, who showed, with great eloquence, that literature might be made subservient to piety and virtue. "I know by experience," said he, "how much the knowledge of letters may contribute to produce just opinions; to render a man eloquent; to perfect his manners; and, what is much more important, to strengthen his religious principles. If you resolve, however, to part with your books, I will never suffer them to fall into base hands. Though separated in body, we are united in mind. I cannot fix any price upon them; and I will only propose one condition, that we shall pass the remainder of our lives together, and that you shall thus enjoy my books and your own."

In subsequent papers, we shall take a view of such of the writings of Boccaccio as have had an influence on modern literature. W.

---

#### THE WANING MOON.

THE waning Moon looks less and less;  
She leaves her walk of loneliness,  
And o'er her face, so wan and fair,  
Slow moves a darkness, like despair.—  
I've mark'd her small, as even now;  
Then smiling with a broader brow,  
Unfolding like some timid flower,  
Until her brightest, loveliest hour.  
But now she fadeth fast away,  
And other orbs shall bless her ray;  
While here no more her vestal light  
Shall gild the gloomy dome of night.  
—So shines the joy we value here!  
Its beams a while our sadness cheer;  
But scarce the brightest hour hath shone,  
It wanes—it steals away—'tis gone!  
And yet we vainly woo the smile  
Of what endures so short a while;  
And give to such a fleeting ray,  
The heart we turn from Heaven away!

D.